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SUBJECT: POPE'S SAINTHOOD CEREMONY FOR HAWAIIAN LEPER PRIEST:
OPPORTUNITIES FOR USG HEALTHCARE ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY
REF: BRUSSELS 1004

¶1. Summary and Action Request: On October 11, Pope Benedict XVI will confer sainthood on ("canonize") Father Damien de Veuster, the Belgian priest who famously worked in the late 1880's with leprosy (Hansen's disease) patients in Hawaii. The event is attracting global attention, not just among Catholics, but also among global activists who use Damien as a model for compassionate care of those with debilitating diseases like HIV/AIDS. Embassy Vatican will host a HIV/AIDS conference October 14-16 together with the Catholic Church's humanitarian assistance arm, Caritas Internationalis, and would welcome Washington participation (e.g., from S/GAC) at the event. Embassy also would be pleased to welcome official representation, in the form of a presidential delegation, at the Damien canonization as another means to emphasize USG leadership in global healthcare. End Summary.

¶2. Father Damien de Veuster (Blessed Damien of Molokai) worked actively in the leper colonies in Hawaii in the late 1880's. Although he eventually succumbed to the disease, his compassion and advocacy reduced the shame surrounding Hansen's disease. Caritas International and other Catholic healthcare and aid agencies use Father Damien as an example in their advocacy for affordable healthcare and access to treatment of those suffering diseases like HIV/AIDS. Indeed, Damien is so beloved that today there are bronze statues honoring the priest in the United States Capitol and in the Hawaii State Capitol.

¶3. During an October 11 ceremony, the Pope will recognize Father Damien and his dedicated service in Hawaii on behalf of people with Hansen's disease. Accompanied by a series of events in Damien's native Belgium (reftel), the ceremony will mark the first canonization of a (albeit adopted) Hawaiian. Hawaiian participation will be noteworthy. Eight patients from Kalaupapa, the colony where Damien worked, will accompany Bishop Larry Silva and members of the Hawaiian clergy to Rome. Embassy understands a National Park Service representative from Kalaupapa may also attend, and would appreciate confirmation of this understanding. Given Father Damien's popularity, we expect extensive U.S. -- and especially Hawaiian -- press coverage, over and above the considerable international media coverage that usually accompanies canonization of new Catholic saints.

¶4. In coordination with Damien's canonization, Embassy Vatican will host a large two-day conference for health care workers together with Caritas Internationalis. The conference will focus on securing better access to early testing and treatment for children living with HIV/AIDS and on prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS. UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibi has confirmed his participation, as have Lesley-Anne Knight, Secretary General of Caritas

Internationalis, and Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, President of Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care.

¶5. Action Request: The Damien canonization provides an important, positive opportunity for the USG to emphasize its advocacy for global health care--highlighting American compassion. The Embassy would be pleased to host a Presidential delegation for the Damien canonization. The Holy See was extremely pleased by the July meeting between President Obama and the Holy Father and would no doubt appreciate the gesture of a Presidential delegation for this celebration, viewing it as a means of furthering U.S.-Vatican dialogue on social justice issues. Embassy further believes participation by the Secretary's Global AIDS Coordinator at its AIDS conference would demonstrate senior-level USG interest and also would provide the Coordinator with excellent networking opportunities.

NOYES